



## Human Papillomavirus (HPV) a fact sheet for teens

HPV often comes up when people talk about genital warts, cervical cancer, abnormal Pap smears and even vaccines. So what is this strange virus that seems to cause so many things? Can it be cured? Prevented? This fact sheet makes understanding HPV simple, so that you know how to protect yourself and keep yourself healthy.

**HPV Basics** HPV is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Both men and women can get HPV during vaginal and anal sex. It is possible to be infected with more than one type of HPV at the same time or in your lifetime. Symptoms of HPV can appear right away or years after you were exposed. This makes it hard to know for sure who passed on the virus to you.

HPV is really common. At least 50% of sexually active people get HPV at some point in their lives. And by age 50, 80% of women will have gotten HPV. Teens and young adults have the highest rates of HPV infection.

**If You Have HPV** HPV often has no symptoms. You can give HPV to your sex partner without even knowing you have it! There is no test for HPV that can tell you your “status,” like with an HIV test.

### Facts About Cervical Cancer

- Every year in the United States, over 11,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 3,670 women die.
- Women of color in the United States have higher rates of cervical cancer than white women. Among women ages 30-54 years, Vietnamese women have the highest rate, followed by Hispanic and black women.
- Over 80% of cervical cancer deaths in the world occur to women who live in developing countries. Pap smears – which test for cancerous or precancerous cells – are not available in many parts of the world.

Most HPV infections go away on their own. This might be because the body’s immune system fights the infection and gets rid of the virus, just like with a cold or the flu. It is also possible that the virus is sleeping, or dormant, and might come back years later. There is no cure for HPV.

There are types of HPV that do affect your health. Some types of HPV cause **genital warts** on men and women. These warts pass through genital area contact during vaginal and anal sex. This can happen when you can see warts and when you can’t. Warts look like growths or bumps in the genital area. They may be pink, white or flesh colored. They can be raised or flat, small or large. There can be one wart or many. If they grow, they can become very uncomfortable, or cause sores or bleeding.

Some people only have one outbreak of warts. Others might have them many times. There is no test for the HPV that causes warts. If you think you have warts or have had sex with someone who has, go to a doctor or clinic. There, they will give you an exam and look

for warts in your genital area. There are treatments that can get rid of the warts, but they don’t cure you of the virus. Even when they are treated, sometimes warts do come back.

Some types of HPV can lead to **cervical cancer**. These types of HPV can also be passed during sex. This HPV causes abnormal cell growth (dysplasia) on a woman’s cervix. If left untreated, these cells can turn into cancer. There is no way to tell by looking if you have this type of HPV. The only way to know is to have a Pap smear – a test for cancerous and precancerous cells.



This is part of the annual gynecological exam. During a **Pap smear**, a health care provider will take a sample of cells from a woman's cervix (the opening to the uterus) and test those cells.

If you have an abnormal Pap test result, your health care provider might run other tests or take a larger sample of cells. This information will help you and your health care provider decide how soon you need another Pap test and evaluate treatment options. If you have an abnormal Pap, it doesn't mean that you will definitely develop cancer. Cervical cancer is preventable if precancerous cells are found and treated early.

**Prevention** If you don't have sex, you can't get HPV. If you are sexually active, having fewer sex partners reduces your chance of being exposed to HPV. Condoms worn during the entire act of sex can also prevent the spread of HPV. However, condoms don't cover all the parts of the genitals that can spread HPV. If you know you have a type of HPV that causes genital warts or cervical cancer, avoid sex until the abnormal cells are treated or until your genital warts have gone away.

For women, regular Pap tests are the best way to check for the high-risk HPV that can lead to cervical cancer. It is important to get Pap smears once a year after a woman turns 18 or starts having sex. Most women who develop cervical cancer did not have regular Pap smears to test for cervical cancer.

You can get a **vaccine** that prevents the transmission of four types of HPV: two that cause cervical cancer and two that cause genital warts. The HPV vaccine has been approved for females ages 9-26. It is recommended that the vaccine be given to girls before they have sex. But the vaccine can also provide protection for women who are already sexually active or already have HPV. The vaccine does not treat or cure HPV if a woman is already infected.

The vaccine lasts for at least five years, possibly longer. The HPV vaccine does not contain a live virus, and will not give you HPV. If a woman gets the HPV vaccine, she still needs regular Pap smears. In making a decision about getting the vaccine, talk with your doctor, parents, school nurse or other public health professional.

#### For More Information

- **Cedar River Clinics** services include birth control, abortion, STI testing and treatment, rapid HIV tests, the HPV vaccine, and Pap smears at 1-800-572-4223. [www.CedarRiverClinics.org](http://www.CedarRiverClinics.org)  
[www.Birth-Control-Comparison.info](http://www.Birth-Control-Comparison.info) [www.FWHC.org](http://www.FWHC.org)
- **Scarleteen** shares thoughtful advice and accurate information about STIs and other sexual health topics. [www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)
- **Centers for Disease Control (CDC)** offers information on HPV and the vaccine. [www.cdc.gov/std/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv)
- Visit [www.CedarRiverClinics.org/Connect](http://www.CedarRiverClinics.org/Connect) to download and order more CONNECT sexual health materials.

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### Men and HPV

Most men who get HPV do not have any symptoms. The types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer in women rarely cause health problems for heterosexual men. But some types of HPV can cause genital warts in men. And men can still pass the cancer-causing types of HPV to their female partner.

HPV can also cause anal and penile cancer. Anal cancer is rare in the general public, but gay and bisexual men are 80 times more likely to contract the disease. HIV-positive men are also at higher risk. Many health care providers suggest anal Pap tests to look for abnormal cells in the anus that could turn into anal cancer. It is estimated that the anal Pap test can reduce the incidence of anal cancer by 80%.

